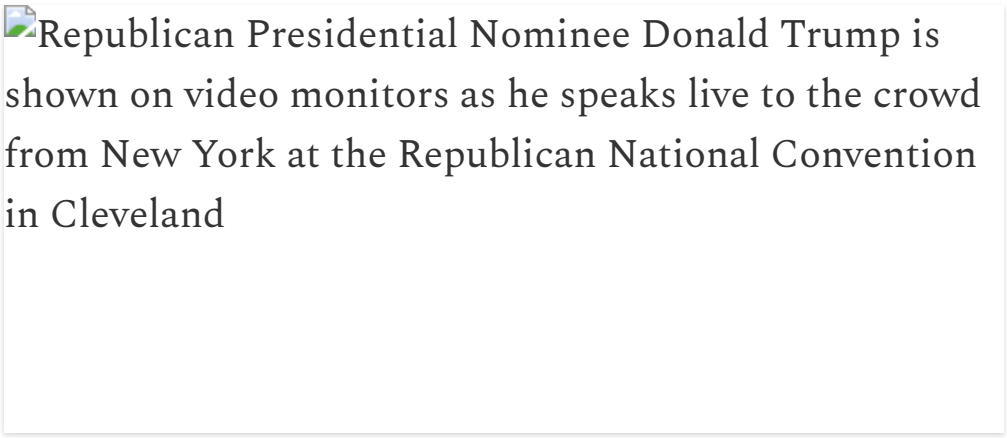
OPINION

The ‘F’ Word


Republican Presidential Nominee Donald Trump is shown on video monitors as he speaks live to the crowd from New York at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland

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Fascism is back, apparently. At the very least, it might be getting more interesting to talk about.

In the period immediately following World War II, both of the triumphant blocs moved rapidly to define the word 'fascism' expediently. The critical objective, on each side, was to emphasize those features comparatively understated in its own domestic version of the phenomenon, in order to underscore the impression that they had unambiguously sided against it. 'Fascism' was, definitively, that thing recently and at an enormous cost defeated. The immense sacrifices – and, in fact, *progressive fascist reconstruction of society that had been accelerated during the war years* – was justified by the crushing defeat of an absolute evil. Distinction was imperative. Thus, the Soviets drew particular attention to the comparatively muted anti-capitalism of the Axis powers, while the Atlantic allies concentrated upon the exotic trappings of German anti-semitic Aryanism. It is particularly notable that the predominant Western definition of fascism is remarkably maladapted to even the most basic comprehension of the Italian original, and that both Western and Soviet anti-fascist narratives are compelled to downplay the revolutionary socialism of its roots, in both its Italian and its German variants.

This is all understandable enough, but it grotesquely mystifies the reality of fascism, which was epitomized – universally – by the 20th-century war economy. Every major contestant of WWII – including the great Asian powers Japan and China – developed fascist governance to an advanced state. The essential feature was state seizure of the economy's 'commanding heights' in the delegated (and integrated) 'popular interest'. During war time such *interest* is peeled back to sheer survival, and thus publicized with dramatic intensity, which is also to say with an unusual absence of skepticism. Fascism is therefore broadly identical with *a normalization of war-powers* in a modern state, that is: *sustained social mobilization under central direction*. Consequently, it involves, beside the centralization of political authority in a permanent war council, a tribal hystericization of social identity, and a considerable measure of economic pragmatism. Fascism is *practical* socialism, distinguished from its dim cousin by its far more sophisticated grasp of incentives, or of human nature in its motivated individual and tribal particularity. When compared to universalistic

communism, fascism's practical advantages are such that 'actually existing socialism' *always* soon turns into it. *National socialism* and *socialism in one country* are not sanely separable things. Everyone knows that the literal meaning of 'fascism' is *bundling*.

Like its Continental European and Soviet competitors, American fascism had been fully consolidated by the beginning of the war. The New Deal cemented its structural pillars into place. Socialization of the economy through central banking, the transformation of the Supreme Court into a facilitator of systematic executive over-reach, and a transformation of mass-politics through broadcast media technologies had composed a new, post-constitutional political order. It is this formation that is so flagrantly entering its phase of terminal dementia today.

Since the fascist state justifies itself through perpetual war, it naturally likes wars that cannot end. The Cold War looked like one, but wasn't quite. The War on Terror is a better bet. In regards to their interminability, if not their moral intensity, 'wars' on poverty, drugs, and other resilient social conditions are more attractive still. Waging modern wars, and their metaphorical side-products, is what the fascist state is for. Winning them on occasion, and by accident, is only ever a misfortune. That lesson seems to have been thoroughly learned.

The recent adaptation to television of Philip K. Dick's prophetic *The Man in the High Castle* is one suggestive indication of a general ideological awakening. In dramatic contrast to the prevailing historical myth, *fascism won WWII* so decisively that its opponents were driven to the political fringes of paleo-conservatism (once mainstream conservatism), libertarianism (once mainstream liberalism), and Trotskyism (once simply 'communism'). The victory was so complete that even policy objectives as blatantly fascistic as *nationalization* could be considered wholly innocent of fascist taint. It wasn't even necessary to say: "Nationalization, but, you know, not in a fascist way." It would be amusing if it hadn't ruined everything. Perhaps it still is amusing. It's notable that humor has become quite a lot rougher recently.

Since fascism had entirely filled the Overton Window, it lost contour, and became invisible. The word persisted in public conversation only as an empty slur. Under this cover, and the absurdly misleading branding associated with it, American fascism ascended to a state of global hegemonic dominance. Since 1989, it has been essentially unchallenged, except by the geopolitical temper-tantrum that is radical Islam. Yet suddenly, from left field, the Trump candidacy has thrown it into crisis.

The flamboyant fascist features of the Trump campaign – and still more of his excited Alt-Right supporters – are deniable only by fools. The prior escalation of overt fascist imagery by the first Obama campaign and subsequent administration was no less remarkable. The established convention in polite society that *all conservative presidential candidates are Hitler* obscured the trend before this year, on both sides. Much of this might be reminiscent of the Jonah Goldberg thesis that *we are all fascists now*, which was near-universally dismissed out of hand, for reasons that have been – until recently – under no socio-political pressure whatsoever to defend themselves. *It's obvious nonsense*, the mind-control class had decided, and that should have been enough for everyone. Those days are unmistakably ending.

The general insight that remains incompletely crystallized is this: *Democracy tends to fascism*, due to its fundamental affinity with tribal mobilization (i.e. its essential illiberalism). The multi-century ratchet of Western democratization has led, exactly, and inexorably, *to this*. If the worst hasn't come yet, it will come soon. We are all close to seeing that now.

An especially obvious catalyst for political radicalization has been the embrace of demographic engineering as an explicit policy objective, of deliberate partisan asymmetry, attended by a rolling thunder of cultural-elite approved rhetoric that has not only been indiscreet, but blatantly triumphalistic. When dismissing fears of 'white genocide' as malignant, and over-wrought, it is not helpful to laugh in public about the steady progress of population replacement (in the fashion of John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, most obviously). At some point, Bertholt Brecht's most celebrated example of devil's advocacy – "Would it not be easier … for the government to

dissolve the people and elect another?" – switched ideological polarity, to become a bitter Alt-Right joke. *The new American demography is really going to screw you guys over* is funny as hell, until – suddenly – it isn't.

There's been a lot of laughter in 2016, but not much smiling. Perhaps it won't be so long before people realize what they've done.

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